

Optimising Classroom Activities in Professional Courses in Business

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Introduction

This paper summaries a 2005 study that aimed to ascertain the optimum mix of activities that can be undertaken in class sessions for part-time professional courses in business, with specific reference to the department of Management and Professional Development at London Metropolitan University. Courses in that department are delivered over 12 to 15 weeks and typically students take two modules simultaneously. Historically sessions for professional courses have been delivered over three-hour periods during weekday evenings from Monday to Friday.

Investigating the optimum content of the 3-hour session involved capturing how students think they learn most effectively and how they remain stimulated to learn in what has become for daytime learners a session length rarely exercised. What may be considered the traditional method of didactic, one-to-many tuition is being challenged by new thinking. For example, more interactive, dialogic sessions where tutors support student learning as opposed to directing it, are increasingly perceived as the preferred method. However, beyond anecdote there is little evidence and there are very few studies about how students learn on a professional course. This study therefore sought to contribute knowledge on an area that is fast growing in the sphere of formal education and one that can legitimately be considered industry-led.

Around 1800 students a year study for professional examinations in City Campus at London Metropolitan University, taking subjects such as accounting, marketing, management and human resources. Tuition is focussed on helping students pass the professional assessments and it is recognised that at times this focus can be at the expense of providing students with more rounded, general, contextual information and knowledge transfer.

Many of the students undertaking professional courses already have an undergraduate degree and many also possess post-graduate qualifications. In continuing to add to their skills set these students display the extrinsic motivations

to study that characterise the autonomous learner (Deci *et al.*, 1991). They are keen to possess the academic knowledge, interested in the vocational aspects and job opportunities afforded by the qualification, motivated by a need for personal fulfilment and enjoy the social aspects of learning (Gibbs, 1992). For other students quite simply it is a case of wishing to gain professional qualifications for career advancement. For some students, such as those studying for ACCA and CIMA qualifications, the qualification may be a requirement for attaining certain responsibility levels within their industry so students must pass the examinations or limit their aspirations.

The Professional Courses area employs the highest proportion of hourly-paid lecturers (HPLs) to full-time lecturers in London Metropolitan University. Most of the HPLs are in full-time employment while a minority are semi-retired or self-employed. Many are not academics but practitioners who have time-consuming day jobs that do not allow for time to attend classes to gain learning and teaching qualifications. They are contracted by the department because of their professional qualifications and experience. These tutors are provided with little support beyond student comments each semester on feedback questionnaires or annual comments from peer observations, and beyond a desire for self-development, they receive no incentive to undertake training. The preference of many HPLs for a didactic teaching style may therefore simply be that they do not know how else to teach. They are time-strapped and it could be argued that this style for imparting knowledge minimises their workload and preparation time. But there is no question mark over the professionalism of these tutors or their knowledge.

Research methods

In investigating student preferences for best use of the standard 3-hour session of class time on a professional course, this study sought to listen to the student voice as heard in a focus group and in the student responses to a survey questionnaire. Students were asked to provide information for analysis so that the feasibility of suggestions made could be considered for making recommendations for changes to delivery of these courses.

This study comprised two parts, with the first following the principles of a phenomenological or grounded approach (Robson, 2002) in which as few assumptions as possible were made, and the second phase employing principles of post-positivism (Bilton *et al.*, 1996).

Stage one centred on the focus group. The topic was 'The student learning experience during the standard 3-hour session in studying on professional course' and all of the participants were students or former students of professional marketing courses at London Metropolitan University.

The questionnaire used in stage two was informed by the findings of the focus group and based on a tried and tested model for researching educational issues (Munn & Drever, 1995). Also, the wording of the questionnaire was trialled with colleagues for construct and validity and changes were made to the questionnaire on the basis of their feedback.

The response was good, with over 50% of students invited completing the response forms. There were relatively few ruined responses, and no complaints were made by students on the questionnaire content or the exercise as a whole. The questions took into account sensitivities surrounding the tuition in the professional course area and students completing the questionnaire confined their responses to those questions asked.

Main findings and recommendations

This section highlights key themes based on the detailed findings recorded in Geddes (2005). There is always a danger in 'adjusting programs too often to accommodate fads' (Knowles & Hensher, 2005) but the study endorsed a need for change in the delivery of professional courses away from the traditional didactic teaching style to dialogic blended delivery.

The focus group was emphatic in its antipathy to lecturers' talking throughout the 3-hour teaching session. At the same time, this group recognised the value of gaining tutor experiences and feedback. Respondents to the questionnaire survey reflected these sentiments and valued dialogue but they also wanted to participate in a number of other activities during class time. These students wanted to be involved in the process of their learning and even to control parts of it. They wanted animation, movement and dialogue and, most of all, they wanted contact with their tutors. As one respondent said:

'I find classes that provide a variety of styles the most useful. A mixture of chalk/talk, group discussions, homework and practice questions.'

Designing the 3-hour session around activities

Being a good teacher is more than simply transmitting facts and learning is more than simply memorising them. This study shows that the process is much more complex than that and involves more intense engagement between all parties, tutor, student and cohort. Education is an activity in which there is an alternative between the roles of student, teacher and person (Jarvis, 1995). To begin with these students seemed almost eager to be perceived as surface learners, only interested in passing their professional examinations. However, that picture conflicts with their desire to understand through enquiry, to question the tutor and listen to classmates. In doing this they are displaying characteristics not of surface learners but of deep learners (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). They engage fully with the process and expect tutors to help them to rationalise theoretical concepts into the business context of

their professions (Kolb, 1984b). As practitioners they have the wherewithal to transform knowledge into experiential learning and they know they are in control of their own learning.

Professional course students are mature and, like the mature students described by Merrill (2001) they are living in two worlds simultaneously. It is perhaps not surprising that they expect their professional values to be reflected in the discipline and structure of the delivery of evening class lectures. In their workplace they are used to the dialogic process and therefore expect to enjoy that activity with their tutors. Their expectations are of knowledge transfer, through basic understanding of theoretical concepts via lectures that are not over long, and they want to be stimulated via tutor-student interactions including questions and answers and group discussions. This study reflects the finding of other researchers that students at London Metropolitan University value well structured, clearly delivered and interactive lectures and seminars (Leathwood & Moreau, 2005).

Dialogue versus monologue

While there is still a place in the classroom setting for tutor monologues, especially when new material is being introduced, students find discussion and questions and answers more stimulating. This is especially so when new concepts are being introduced as students wish to be able to learn through looking at presentations, pictures and diagrams (Felder & Silverman, 1988; Felder & Soloman, 2005). Students want tutors to illustrate workings on the whiteboard and provide the types of support in class that students are not able to obtain through self-study. Unlike undergraduates, students of professional courses have been in the workplace for at least two years and they have experience of mature and pointed business discussions. These students expect to be treated as adult learners and as such prefer to interact with their tutors.

Homework and feedback

Students need feedback and they are prepared to take this from their classmates as well as from the tutor. In accepting this, these students are again displaying high levels of maturity, self-awareness and the robustness needed to take constructive criticism. Their focus is on achievement and it would appear that their ability to envision this supersedes any embarrassment about possibly appearing to be lacking in knowledge. This liberating attitude probably accounts for their eagerness to be able to question tutors in class. They know that completing homework assignments enhances their chances of passing examinations and they are prepared to complete work at home. However when students undertake homework outside the 3-hour evening class session, do written exercises in class or take part in mock examinations, they want their tutor to provide feedback so that they understand how they are progressing. In-class exercises are also deemed valuable so long as they are accompanied by discussions to reinforce the learning. Students also thought that working with other students in a study group could support their learning.

Learning groups and peer support

Success and progress for these students involves a degree of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993) so learning from peers is an important part of the experience. For these students who are used to groups and teams in the workplace, group work is a key skill and using it in the professional course learning environment presents them with opportunities to hone that skill by dealing with problem individuals and new situations (Business Education Support Team, 2004). The tutor's role in this is to facilitate but ultimately to encourage students to take responsibility for outcomes and that must be considered a valuable part of the professional course learner's classroom experience. Commitment, self-esteem and satisfaction have been linked with academic performance (Bennett, 2003) and providing a tame environment where students can polish their negotiation and presentation skills should form part of the professional course offering. Peer support groups in evening classes are self-selecting and therefore engender commitment to shared success. Encountering different types of learners in this situation, interactions for example between serialists and holists (Pask, 1976), enhances the understanding of human nature that is necessary for success in the managerial and leadership roles that these students are studying towards.

Case studies and tests

The use of case studies and the concomitant use of small learning groups can achieve additional educational outcomes to students' acquisition of knowledge (Drinan cited in Boud *et al.*, 1985) for it motivates students to learn, be inquisitive, seek out knowledge sources, develops the ability to work with others and enables better communication (also see Brennan & Ahmad, 2005). To understand real situations in business, professional course students would like more case studies, but they are anxious that these should reflect situations in their own service or product sector. Students were reluctant to undertake homework but perceived the use of case studies as beneficial to their learning, assuming they were relevant. In catering for this requirement, investments would have to be made in the case study banks at universities. Currently there is a dearth of case study material for mature, experienced students used to the complexities and ambiguities of the business world. The professional Institutions provide some material but not enough variety in products and services, especially the finance sector. Students are prepared to work on case studies in the classroom and outside in their own time, but key to success in this activity is feedback and guidance from an expert tutor.

On-line support and distance learning

Most respondents tended to think that online support would be a valuable addition to, but not a substitution for, their class-based learning. This is significant for almost every aspect of respondents' lives will have been touched by the accessibility of new supportive technologies. Nonetheless, the message that these students are giving in their responses is that currently there is no substitute for learning from a real

practitioner and no feedback as valuable as that provided directly by their tutors on the work they have produced. It would be easy to dismiss this, but often for these students, tutors are the only expert contacts they can approach in order to improve their professional skills. Seeking feedback in the workplace can be perceived as a weakness but that is not the case when feedback is elicited from tutors whose experience is often more rounded than work colleagues because they have had greater exposure to a larger number of organisational practices.

Conclusion

The overwhelming message from this study is that students find that class-time interactions with their tutors adds value to their knowledge and experience in studying. Students are willing to forfeit other activities to have the time for this interaction. It is therefore incumbent upon tutors to find ways of providing that interaction and feedback efficiently, at minimum time-cost to themselves. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of this study is that students clearly value their time in the classroom and that is why they attend evening classes at London Metropolitan University as opposed to taking correspondence or distance learning classes. They are aware of other ways of studying that utilise new technologies but have rejected them in favour of face-to-face contact and more traditional methods of knowledge transfer and learning. This generation of professional course learners, who have a range of technology available to them and who are literate and aware of other options, relegates technology to the role of support and emphasises face-to-face dialogic teaching as their preferred delivery method.

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Biographical note:

Following a career in the telecommunications industry, Jean Geddes took up a full-time post on the academic staff of London Guildhall University in 2000, which upon merger became London Metropolitan University. She lectured on business, management and marketing on the MBA, CIM and ICSA programs. In addition, for the last two years, until July 2006, Jean was the Programme Area Coordinator for Professional Courses. In 2006 Jean was offered the opportunity of lecturing in Los Angeles so recently moved to the US for three years. After a Ph.D. thesis on “Women in Management: Barriers to Career Progress”, Jean’s research interests have extended to exploring how post-experience students learn best, and how this can be facilitated by optimising classroom activities.